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Winter, K. (2018). Early Intervention Support Services in Northern Ireland. Child and Family Law Update, 1-2.

**Published in:**  
Child and Family Law Update

**Document Version:**  
Peer reviewed version

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**  
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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## **EARLY INTERVENTION SUPPORT SERVICES IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

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### **Background**

The Early Intervention Foundation ([www.eif.org.uk](http://www.eif.org.uk)) states that early intervention is about 'taking action as soon as possible to tackle problems for children and families before they become more difficult to reverse'. Early intervention spans the age range from conception to early adulthood and involves the identification of children and families who might be at risk of running into difficulties. Services aim to provide timely, effective support from different sectors (including education, health, youth justice, social care) to support parents to provide an enriching environment for children to grow up in.

The drivers behind the emphasis on early intervention are legal, moral and financial. From a legal perspective and as signatories to the UNCRC, articles 5, 18 and 27 make clear that the duty of the State is to provide 'appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and to develop institutions, facilities and services for the care of children'. These duties are enshrined in child care legislation in Northern Ireland.

Within a social justice framework there is also a moral imperative to ameliorate early childhood disadvantage, because the evidence shows how this is directly correlated with unequal life chances (Allen, 2011; NIE, 2011; Davidson et al., 2012).

Finally, and financially, there is a concern about the amount of public money that is spent on addressing problems that have become chronic and enduring. Evidence suggests that a relatively small investment

early on to tackle the root causes of problems before they take hold is more cost effective than dealing with the damaging after effects (DfE/Wave Trust, 2013).

### **Wider Policy Context**

Legal developments in Northern Ireland are supported by a range of policy developments that also place a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention including: Families Matter (DHSSPSNI, 2009); Healthy Child, Healthy Future (DHSSPSNI, 2010); Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning (DENI, 2012); Transforming Your Care: Vision to Action (HSCB, 2013); Making Life Better (DHSSPSNI, 2014). These all share in common five themes: early intervention family support; collaboration in planning and delivery; outcomes; evidence informed/evidence based; and delivering services differently.

At the level of practice, these themes have informed the work of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) which was established in 2011 and whose membership is drawn from a range of professions both statutory and voluntary. Supported by a number of associated structures and processes (including Family Support Hubs and regional sub groups), the CYPSP takes the view that activities aligned to early intervention can be divided into three categories: preventative; protective; remedial/therapeutic (Statham and Smith, 2010).

### **Early Intervention with Families**

In Northern Ireland, and elsewhere, the Hardiker thresholds of need model has had a profound influence on the conceptualization of family support in that it has signaled the move away from 'prevention' as having negative connotations (e.g. preventing something that is already happening) to a more

proactive approach. The model depicts four levels of need (DHSSPSNI, 2009).

Level One represents the base population of children and families and universal access to services. Level Two depicts those with some additional needs who are vulnerable and in need of support. Level Three represents children with complex needs that are chronic and enduring, whilst Level Four represents those with complex and acute needs who are in alternative care arrangements. Within this framework, EISS is aimed specifically at Level Two families. Families at this Level are those where vulnerabilities are noted, where there is no statutory social work involvement and where the aim of the early intervention services is to prevent deterioration.

### **Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP)**

In Northern Ireland, the Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP) forms one of three new signature programmes that was announced by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in September 2014. The EITP has an investment of £25 million over a three-year period and is jointly funded by the Northern Ireland Executive and The Atlantic Philanthropies.

The EITP adopts a preventative model and involves six Government Departments collaborating to: equip all parents with the skills needed to give their child the best start in life; support families when problems first emerge, outside the statutory system; positively address the impact of adversity on children by intervening both earlier and more effectively to reduce the risk of poor outcomes later in life.

The EITP is supported by three Work Streams. Work Stream 2 is concerned with those families at Level Two where, despite parental/carer access to universal services, some require additional support. Under Work Stream 2, families can access

a range of supportive services through the Early Intervention Support Service (EISS).

### **The EISS Programme**

The EISS programme is structurally aligned to Family Support Hubs and offers a service to defined geographical areas (ward delineated), with one EISS in each of the five Health and Social Care Trusts. The number of Family Support Hubs to which EISS is aligned in each Trust varies, as does the extent of geographical coverage.

In different Trusts different service providers are responsible for the oversight of the EISS. The common aspects of the EISS are that they all receive their own referrals directly from a number of sources including: self-referrals; education; health; and social services. They also all employ Project Workers, from different professional backgrounds, who have all been trained to engage in holistic assessments of need using a number of Outcomes Stars.<sup>1</sup>

Following assessment all of the Project Workers have been trained to deliver a number of short term interventions (12 weeks' maximum) that include a range of evidence-informed therapeutic and brief interventions namely: the Solihull Approach; Motivational Interviewing; Solution Focused Brief Therapy; parenting programmes (Strengthening Families and Incredible Years); and family group conferencing (both accessed by project worker referral).

In summary, therefore, the EISS programme represents a short-term intervention based on the referral of families to an EISS team. Those families deemed to be in need of support are assessed using the Family Star Plus and one or more short-term interventions are identified for them to address their needs. The involvement of families therefore typically lasts 12-15 weeks from initial

referral to the end of the interventions provided.

**Does it work?**

An evaluation that is ongoing seeks to address whether the Early Intervention Support Services (EISS) programme is effective in improving parenting skills and through this, outcomes for children and families. Within this, the evaluation will address a number of subsidiary questions

(Option 1): How reliable and valid is the Outcomes Star as a measure of key outcomes among parents and their children? How well does EISS, and its component elements, fit to the local geographical and stakeholder context? And what is the indicative experience of parents taking part in EISS, in other words their journey travelled?

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<sup>1</sup> Family Star Plus with parents/carers; My Star for children; and Teen Star for teenagers.